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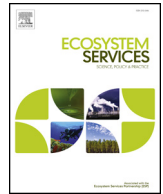
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IPBES: Don't throw out the baby whilst keeping the bathwater; Put people's values central, not nature's contributions

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ABSTRACT

IPBES has replaced the term 'ecosystem services' with 'nature's contributions to people'. This make-over does little to address the semantic problems associated with ecosystem services. The 'new' term still characterises the relation between nature and people as one-way and the value of nature as instrumental (as a provider of benefits), masking human agency and broader values. By replacing ecosystem services with a near-synonymous term, IPBES ditches the baby (the successful term ecosystem services), whilst keeping the dirty bathwater (the problems with the term). This distracts from the otherwise much-improved comprehensiveness of its valuation framework in terms of pluralism. To be genuinely inclusive, IPBES should use an altogether different headline terminology that centres around people's values and makes objects of value such as ecosystem services subsidiary. This allows diverse conceptions of human-nature relating and plural values of nature to genuinely stand on a par, whilst not ditching the baby. In the end, we can only integrate values in environmental governance, not services or contributions — ultimately it is the societal importance ascribed to nature that matters.

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), articulation of a new conceptual framework for ecosystem services has been a keystone activity. Recently, IPBES authors [Díaz et al. \(2018\)](#) proposed for the term 'nature's contributions to people' (NCP) to succeed 'ecosystem services' at the core of the IPBES framework. The authors argue that while ecosystem services have made strong inroads into policy discourses, their framing has been too narrow to engage broader social science and indigenous perspectives. They note that ecosystem services are associated with a stock-flow model of nature-human relationships and bias towards western scientific and economic perspectives of nature. In contrast, IPBES seeks a pluralistic approach to knowledge and values, incorporating a broad set of western and non-western ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies of human-nature relations. The term NCP would better help meet this objective.

In this paper, I will argue that, while the term ecosystem services has inherent semantic limitations, the near-synonymous term NCP does little to address these and is, in some respects, more problematic. There is undeniably dirty bathwater associated with the term ecosystem services, such as the perception that the final purpose of their valuation is to commodify and privatise nature, although the ecosystem services field has in reality not taken this direction ([Braat, 2018](#); [Costanza et al., 2017](#)). But while 'contribution' might sound less market-oriented than 'service', the term NCP still semantically expresses an instrumental, anthropocentric slant, emphasising nature as an instrument to human

well-being. Thus, replacing ecosystem services with this 'new' (or not so new, see [Braat, 2018](#)) term appears a rebranding exercise more driven by politics than substance (also see [De Groot et al., 2018](#)), unfortunately distracting us from more meaningful IPBES advancements. Instead, I will argue, IPBES should more genuinely update its headline terminology to reflect its inclusive thinking, and put peoples' plural values of nature central instead of either services or contributions. This way, ecosystem services need not be ditched, but can be subsidiary to a broader more comprehensive framing of inclusive valuation, thus keeping the baby whilst just draining the dirty water.

Semantics and what headline terminology we choose are important; the terms we use and emphasise inevitably influence how we frame and think about issues ([Lakoff, 2010](#)). It is important here to distinguish between semantics, and concepts and frameworks. [Díaz et al. \(2018\)](#) present an IPBES framework that has evolved from that of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment ([MEA, 2005](#)) and [TEEB \(2010\)](#). For example, the new framework replaces the well-established division in provisioning, regulating, cultural and supporting services with material, non-material and regulating contributions so that, amongst other reasons, culture is not relegated to a single category of services but salient more broadly. My critique in this paper is not directed towards these broader changes but focuses on the term NCP — IPBES' central, headline term — and what this term implies. For the sake of comparison, there are many different conceptions and interpretations of the term ecosystem services ([Costanza et al., 2017](#); [Braat & De Groot, 2012](#)). Rather than comparing the concept of NCP to one or the other concept of ecosystem services, I focus on unpicking some of the basic

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semantic similarities and differences between the two terms. Thus, where I refer to NCP or ecosystem services, unless otherwise specified, I refer to the terms, not the broader concepts or frameworks.

I will make my argument as follows. Firstly, NCP signifies two discrete objects (nature and people) with a discernible, unidirectional flow of benefits (contributions) from one to the other. This does not reflect how people contribute to nature, and masks co-production between ecosystems and people and reciprocal values. Essentially, NCP fails to reflect that relationships with nature are a two-way affair. Indeed, though still problematic in this regard, I will argue that ecosystem services is the more encompassing term. I will next point out that putting nature central as the provider of contributions continues to bias towards a western realist epistemology. Finally, but crucially, the idea of contributions to people continues to focus our attention on an instrumental frame of nature, i.e. as a source of human benefits deemed valuable. Thus, I propose that IPBES should not highlight any single benefit-focused term, and indeed not put nature as an object of value central but plural values themselves. This provides a more comprehensive frame to encompass our living *from*, *in* and *with* nature, and the diverse ways in which we can know and conceive of this.

2. Unpicking the semantics of nature's contributions to people

Both the semantics of ecosystems providing services (and dis-services) to people, and nature contributing (positively and negatively) to people's well-being, present a picture of nature and people as separate objects, with a distinct directional flow of benefits from the former to the latter. This directional focus is problematic firstly because it masks the many contributions from people to nature, and the entanglement of biodiversity and people in many ecosystems (Raymond et al., 2017). For example, much biodiversity in semi-natural landscapes is dependent on particular human practices such as herding and tree coppicing. While human actions are typically portrayed as the primary cause of biodiversity loss, not just our detrimental actions are to blame but also the decline of beneficial actions.

Furthermore, it is now well-established that ecosystem services are in many cases co-produced by humans, i.e. their benefits are partially the product of human inputs (Costanza et al. 2017; Jones et al., 2016; Raymond et al., 2017). This is acknowledged by the IPBES framework as anthropogenic 'assets' feeding into NCP, and indeed IPBES goes further by recognising the cultural constructedness of NCP (Díaz et al., 2018). Moreover, IPBES, like other recent ecosystem service models (e.g. Costanza et al. 2017; UK National Ecosystem Assessment, 2014; De Groot et al. 2010), presents a cyclical frame with feedback effects from human well-being and governance institutions. IPBES also increasingly emphasises relational values such as reciprocity (Díaz et al., 2018). Many human value systems and religious practices include duties to nature and reciprocal norms (Cooper et al., 2016).

However, this is all not reflected in the term NCP anymore so than ecosystem services. NCP still imply that the ultimate recipients of the flow of benefits are people with nature the sole provider. The term does not reflect that relationships with nature are fundamentally a two-way affair of both nature contributing to people and people contributing to nature.

It can even be argued that NCP implies less agency to people than ecosystem services. The noun *contribution* means "a gift or payment to a common fund or collection" or "the part played by a person or thing in bringing about a result or helping something to advance", while the verb *contribute* means "to give in order to help achieve or provide something", or "to help to cause or bring about" (British Oxford Dictionary of English, 2018). The noun *service* means "the action of helping or doing work for someone" or "a system supplying a public need".¹ At least the term

services implies an individual or collective beneficiary that demands or needs the service; without this there is at most a potential service. Whereas service implies a degree of symmetry between the demander and the provider, the term contribution emphasises the contributor and the aim of the contribution (i.e. what it seeks to achieve); an expression of demand is not strictly necessary for something to be regarded as a contribution as long as the contribution helps achieve something. This opens up potential for mis- or abuse. For example, a transnational corporation might take various actions to enable NCP and offset its global negative impacts on the environment, such as conserving an area of rainforest, supporting its green credentials with its clients and shareholders. But it is not inherent in the term NCP that what the company is achieving is also demanded by those who supposedly benefit (e.g. the forest may not be managed in a way that meets local needs), who may be subjected to NCP without consultation or consent. There are already many instances where the term ecosystem services is misused due to lack of understanding or abused to further a particular agenda (e.g. McHale et al., 2018). The point here is that NCP opens up a further semantic vector for misunderstandings and abuse and could jeopardise current, gradually built up stakeholder understanding of ecosystem services.

The directional focus from nature to people also underlines nature as the central, discrete object of investigation, even if just by virtue of grammar. In contrast to what Díaz et al. (2018) claim, this continues bias towards the realist knowledge perspective common to most of western natural science, where the world can be known independently of human experience. Many indigenous people and social science and humanities disciplines present a different view (e.g. Raymond et al., 2017). Díaz et al. (2018) themselves discuss the perspective of the Warlpiri, where nature and people are seen as one body and within a reciprocal relationship. Making these worldviews fit with NCP risks reducing them, just as characterising them as ecosystem services would.

Finally, and crucially, the idea of contributions to people, while sounding less economic, still reflects a similar instrumental ethical slant, framing nature as a means to a human end. NCP are promoted by Díaz et al. (2018) as being inclusive of non-instrumental values, and in particular rights-based approaches, but they do not argue why this is the case. It is not evident how contributions could encompass rights; from our earlier discussion of the semantics of contributions, it is clear that they are end-seeking, while rights are ends in themselves.

Of course, the instrumental nature of NCP does not necessarily equate to the narrow, preference utilitarian perspective of neoclassical economics much critiqued within this field (e.g. Hejnowicz and Rudd, 2017; Irvine et al., 2016; Kenter et al., 2015; Parks and Gowdy, 2013; Hockley, 2014; Chan et al., 2012; O'Neill et al., 2008; Forster, 1997). However, it certainly paves the way for conceiving of nature in such a way. This is the case because, if nature provides contributions (positively or negatively) to people's well-being in a number of ways (x_n), an intuitive next step is to consider how various policy or management options (y_n) affect x_n , and a third analytical step whether we can find the y_i that presents an optimal way of trading off between $x_1...x_n$, or rank $y_1...y_n$ in terms of optimality. The simple elegance of this conceptualisation, accompanied by well-established models and tools, and its ideological entrenchment within institutions for resource allocation (e.g. ministries of finance) give mainstream economics a strong trump with decision makers, despite the vast number of assumptions and simplifications required to operationalise such comparisons (Hockley, 2014). Together, the instrumental conception of nature and bias towards a realist perspective for its understanding provide the cornerstones for the dominant discourse of nature as a resource to be (more) efficiently managed. Replacing ecosystem services by NCP does little to challenge this.

Even if NCP are seen in the way that least aligns with neoclassical economics, as 'nature's gifts' to people's quality of life broadly envisaged, this is still a limited conception of why nature matters, which will continue to lead to questions of inclusion and legitimacy. It is interesting to note here that the word services can also be envisaged in different economic and non-economic ways that do not ring of utility optimisation.

¹ I have omitted other meanings to the terms contribution and service that are not relevant to our discussion, e.g. a contribution as a piece of writing or a service as a religious rite.

Public services provide public goods outside of the market. Social services can be seen as a right as much as a benefit. People provide public service as a duty. In many spiritual traditions service is also associated with duty and virtue. Indeed, many recent valuations in the ecosystem services field fit with these non-market conceptions of services, with the field vastly expanding in terms of knowledge and value perspectives over time connecting a wide range of disciplines (Costanza et al., 2017; Braat, 2018). But whether or not ecosystem services could be ‘redeemed’ in this way (also see O’Neill, 2018), is, however, not ultimately important. Elevating any model of human-nature relations will constrain values in some way or implicitly emphasise certain types of values over others and thus can be challenged on grounds of inclusivity. I will discuss how to move beyond such an approach in the next section.

3. Inclusivity means putting people’s values central

Díaz et al. (2018) argue (again without evidencing this) that NCP would enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of environmental policies (presumably compared to ecosystem services). It would also help overcome power asymmetries between different knowledge perspectives. The need to be inclusive “required IPBES to move to using NCP.” (Díaz et al., 2018, p.271). From the argument I have made above, these claims appear highly debatable. While the overall approach of IPBES is undeniably more inclusive than that of the MEA, the proposal to re-brand ecosystem services as NCP does not reflect this improvement but detracts from it. While IPBES in theory seeks to regard all types of values without bias, the emphasis on NCP unavoidably promotes a subset in practice. For example, the title of Pascual et al. (2017), which introduces the IPBES valuation framework, is “Valuing nature’s contributions to people: the IPBES approach,” which by highlighting contributions does not reflect that the framework also includes non-instrumental values. Apparently, all values (and conceptualisations of our relation with nature) are equal but some are more equal than others.

What is needed is not to replace a successful but limiting headline term with another equally limiting but unproven one, but an altogether different approach. Such an approach should put peoples’ plural values themselves central in its framework and headline terminology, whilst allowing for any number of conceptions of objects of value (such as diverse interpretations of ecosystem services, nature’s gifts, right-bearing aspects of nature, reciprocal relationships with nature, and including conceptions where there is no clear distinction between the valuer and object of value), but making all of these subsidiary. This enables a genuine embrace of diverse knowledge and values.

In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss in more detail what I mean when I propose to put values central. I will consider three aspects of values that should be central to a comprehensive valuation framework: first that we need to equally consider transcendental and contextual values, secondly that we need a simple and inclusive way to understand and communicate why nature matters, and thirdly that we need to better recognise that environmental values are not necessarily held or preformed, meaning that valuation should incorporate appropriate processes for value formation.

When I suggest to put values central, I take values to mean both the importance we ascribe to nature (contextual values and their indicators) as expressed in our attitudes, preferences and behaviour, and our overarching life goals and principles (transcendental values) that influence what we value in specific contexts (Kenter et al., 2015). Transcendental values have thus far seen little consideration within ecosystem assessment (Raymond and Kenter, 2016), even though they are thought to play an important role in shaping our environmental behaviour (Dietz et al., 2005). They are nominally part of the IPBES valuation frame (though Pascual et al. (2017) mention only principles, not broader life goals), but the focus on contributions continues to steer attention towards contextual values.

In terms of the second aspect, a salient way of inclusively categorising our values of nature is presented by O’Neill et al. (2008). They

point out that, fundamentally, our environment matters in three ways: 1) we live *from* it; the way that nature sustains us; 2) we live *in* it; the way that the environment defines the spaces where our lives take place and that we relate to and within; and 3) we live *with* it, where the natural world extends beyond us, bearing a value that is beyond our human interests and ends, yet which we can still consider and recognise (O’Connor and Kenter, 2018). This may be a more effective approach to communicate values, especially to non-academics, than by using highly abstract (e.g. instrumental, intrinsic) or ill-defined (e.g. relational, sociocultural) terms, and is able to encompass any number of conceptions of the relationship between people and nature.

A third central aspect of understanding values that needs to be considered is that values are not necessarily *held* in a preformed way by individuals, waiting there to be measured, but may need to be *formed* through a social process of informal or formal deliberation and expression, potentially resulting in shared or social values (Gregory et al., 1993; Urama and Hodge, 2006; Spash, 2007; Kenter et al., 2011, 2015, 2016a,b; Irvine et al., 2016; Hansjürgens et al., 2017). Here, key questions need to be considered in terms of how different processes shape different values, depending on factors such as who participates, power dynamics, and process design (Kenter et al., 2016c).

Putting values central allows us to genuinely promote assessment of all values in relation to nature, in their diversity across these different aspects, without the constraints of a biased frame hungover from the MEA. A further benefit of putting values central instead of NCP or ecosystem services is that it encourages drawing on a broader knowledge base than is currently drawn upon by IPBES (also see Raymond et al., 2018). By focusing on values, we can more effectively cross over into other, non-environmental arenas that deal with values and their integration in decisions, from economic development to cultural studies to the valuation of health and social care.

Finally, it is important to note that putting people’s values central in this way does not preclude the consideration of biodiversity and ecosystem services in ecological or biophysical terms. Biophysical measures can be seen as contextual value indicators, because they are imbued with human judgements such as legal thresholds, targets, or designated statuses, and these in turn reflect underlying transcendental values around our relation to nature, such as the basic principle of conservation biology that biodiversity is a good in itself (Meffe and Carroll, 1994). Ecological understanding can thus also easily be related to the different ways in which nature matters, including living from (e.g. nutrient cycling supporting agriculture), living in (e.g. ecological history as part of our identity) and living with (e.g. population dynamics of species) values.

4. Conclusions

The move by IPBES to replace ecosystem services with NCP is an outcome of politics, not rigorous thinking. The choice of this term simply does not make sense in light of the leap forward in terms of the way that IPBES has otherwise embraced shared, plural and cultural values (Pascual et al., 2017). If IPBES wishes to treat diverse values associated with living from, in and with nature as equal, why put a ‘new’ term central that does not address any of the semantic limitations of ecosystem services in this regard, yet, as Díaz et al. (2018) do, misguidedly argue it is superior? This comes down to ditching the baby whilst leaving the dirty bathwater. Ecosystem services are a potent and well-established frame for assessing the *value of nature to people* to inform decisions. To better reflect its limitations, the term should not be replaced, but its frame be made subsidiary, treated as one amongst diverse conceptualisations in broader, pluralistic, integrated assessments (see Jacobs et al., 2016; Kenter, 2016) that put *people’s values of nature* central, encompassing living from, in and with the environment. This includes not only the contextual values people individually and collectively express in relation to nature, but also the transcendental values that guide our cultural and ethical relationship with nature, voiced in questions such as:

who are we in relationship to nature, what rights does nature have, what role does nature play in living 'the good life' and what are just processes for valuing nature? Finally, such a framework should place such processes central not just for eliciting values but also for forming shared social values expressing the common good.

In the end, we can only integrate values in governance, not services or contributions. Services or contributions can just be integrated indirectly; ultimately it is the societal importance that we ascribe to these services or contributions, and biodiversity and nature more broadly, that can be reflected in decisions. And it is only by changing our decisions that nature can be safeguarded, whether for its own sake or for its many services to peoples' quality of life.

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